

**FMSO Commentary.** *The following 2008 article was translated from an online article/post on a website about post-Soviet Airborne Forces. The article was apparently written by a former member of the Kazakh Airmobile Forces, and gives an unvarnished view of day-to-day life in the Kazakh military. This account, although not confirmed, appears to be factually correct based upon several mentioned events that have been corroborated by other trusted sources. The author's account is particularly valuable because it gives a good description of the transition from Soviet Army to Kazakh Army, Kazakh operations during the Tajik civil war, daily life, and discipline in the Soviet/Kazakh Army. Of particular interest is how the author describes the level of discipline and prestige of military service from its peak during Soviets times, low level in the early 1990s, and current level today. FMSO comments are annotated by "{ }" in the text. End FMSO Commentary.*

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Author: Unknown

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Commentary: Charles K. Bartles

## **History of the Creation of the Republic of Kazakhstan's Airmobile Forces**

The entire history of the Kazakh Airmobile Forces can be divided into two stages:

**Stage 1** – May 7, 1992 to June 6, 2000 – chronicle of the 35th Separate Airborne Assault Brigade (SAAB)

**Stage 2** – June 6, 2000 to the present – creation of the Airmobile Forces.

### **Stage One – 35th Separate (in the truest sense of the word) Airborne Assault Brigade**

The history of the Kazakh Airborne Forces begins with the origin of the Kazakh Armed Forces. On May 7, 1992, intergovernmental talks in Almaty definitively divided the last two Commonwealth of Independent States' armies, the Russian and the Kazakh armies, hitherto considered a single whole. All troop formations on Kazakh territory joined the Kazakh Armed Forces, except for units of the Strategic Missile Forces (a division in Derzhavinsk) and strategic aviation (a division in Zhangiz Tobe), the space communication and spacecraft tracking station units (in Shengel'dy and near Astana), and the units comprising the Baikonur and Priozersk garrisons.

The roughly 160,000-strong 40th Combined Arms Army, under the command of Lieutenant General Ryabtsev, was in Kazakhstan at the time the Kazakh Armed Forces were formed. At its low point, 1996-97, the Army's strength fell to 45,000. Serviceman in the Kazakh Ministry of Defense now number 76,000.

The Kazakh army inherited the only airborne unit in Kazakhstan by order of the USSR Ministry of Defense Joint Staff – the 35th Separate Airborne Assault Brigade (SAAB), which had been withdrawn from the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG) a year earlier. The press and TV officially reported at the time that the Kazakh Army had a service branch – Airborne Troops – and

that they were represented by a single troop unit – the Kapchagai 35th SAAB. The 35th Brigade commander's semi-official title was airborne forces commander. The deputy brigade commander for airborne training called himself deputy commander of the airborne forces, perhaps in jest, perhaps seriously. It rang with both pride and humor.



Soldiers of the 36<sup>th</sup> SAAB during the ILI-2006 assault crossing exercise

The Aktogai 57th SAAB had been disbanded earlier, due to the alternating unification and breakup of the Central Asian Military District and the Turkestan Military District. All materiel was moved by railroad to the Latvian SSR. Having been withdrawn from the former GDR, the 35th Brigade was billeted in the military towns of the former GRU 22nd Special Purpose Brigade, at the Anti-Aircraft Missile Engineering Facility, and at the Kapchagai Garrison troop units' 1<sup>st</sup> deployment line (in 1991 there were 16 military units in two lines at the Kapchagai Garrison). The Kazakh Army also inherited a GRU special purpose separate company from the 22nd Special Purpose Brigade, which at the time was a special purpose training regiment. This GRU special purpose separate company was deployed at the 2nd line until 2000, after which it was redeployed to Almaty.

When the 35th Brigade was moved to Kapchagai it was, like all Soviet GSFG battle units, a full-strength, roughly 2,700-man brigade of four battalions, an artillery battalion and a full complement of special units.

When the 35th Brigade was made part of the Kazakh Armed Forces in 1992, Slav officers began leaving en masse for the Russian Army; this exodus continued until 1996. Only Slav officers who were Kazakh natives remained in the brigade. There were also Kazakh officers who transferred to the Russian Army (for example, the commanders of the 4th and 8th Airborne Assault Companies and the commander of the 2nd Airborne Assault Battalion (AABat)). At the same time, Kazakh officers from other post-Soviet armies transferred to the 35th Brigade; for example, Brigade Commander Guards Colonel Elamanov transferred to the post of 35th Brigade Chief of Staff from Chief of Staff of a Belarusian army tank division.

### **Tajik Tours of Duty**

Three months after the creation of the Kazakh Army, civil war broke out in our almost-neighbor, the Republic of Tajikistan, claiming 50,000 lives. This war gave the green 35th Brigade its first combat experience. Under a collective treaty, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan each sent a battalion of soldiers to support Russian border troops in Gorno-Badakhshan Oblast. Because this was an emergency, it was decided a battalion from the 35th SAAB, the most combat-capable unit. However, they forgot to take two key factors into consideration.

First, these were Soviet-era draftees who, with the parade of sovereignties, just could not figure out in which army they were serving or wanted to serve, and, with the growing infection of perestroika-inspired pacifism, they asked themselves whether it was worth serving at all or fighting for anyone. The author is well acquainted with the army atmosphere of those days because at that very time – summer 1992 – he had the opportunity to chat with fellow countrymen who had been drafted by the Soviets in 1990-91 and had served in units of what had become the Russian Army, namely a Russian force grouping in Transcaucasia. Some of my fellow Kazakhs were fighting hard for the Armenians, but the bulk were fighting equally hard for the Azeris, and both were in the ranks of the now Russian Army. It was an odd time.

The second key factor that the army brass failed to take into account was the outright refusal of the 35th Brigade officers to go to Tajikistan. As a result, the 35th's first Tajik tour of duty included only conscript soldiers led by conscript sergeants. According to eyewitness reports, their entire seven months in Gorno-Badakhshan could hardly be described as a military presence. A more precise description would be the presence of a group of unruly armed persons with no command or specific mission whatsoever. Imagine three complete companies of conscripts left entirely to their own devices, with few supplies. These conscripts forgot what a bath or clean bed linen was, and did not believe that they would ever return home. Some of them fought for local field commanders "under contract."

Guards Warrant Officer Mikheev, then a company master sergeant, who in 1993 took command of a group of soldiers from the first tour of duty, told this tale:

Thirty soldiers came into the barracks, all thin, dirty and scruffy. Some were wearing sneakers and galoshes without socks instead of knee-high or ankle boots (it was winter). I looked at them and PITIED them! Even their clothes had long ceased to look like uniforms – they were more frazzled than kitchen fatigues. No one handed over their weapons or ammunition – they dumped a pile of rusty automatic rifles and rusty cartridges near the gun rack and that was it. I rubbed them and checked the numbers – in my company some pieces aren't numbered at all. I went to a neighboring company and the company commander and master sergeant were freaking out – turns out the rifles were theirs.

Since the vast majority of the soldiers from the first tour of duty were natives of Kazakhstan, they were discharged the day after they returned.

Our army and the press maintained dead silence about the paratroopers' first Tajik tour of duty. Later tours of duty were organized strictly by the book. The usual practice was to send a consolidated rifle battalion to Tajikistan for three months, rotating a consolidated company from the Sary-Ozek Motorized Rifle Division or from the border guard command with a company from the 35th and a company from the interior troops' Special Purpose Shymkent Regiment.

Tours of duty to Tajikistan from the 35th ended in July 1994 due to an incident that occurred a week before the scheduled departure of the next company. An automatic rifle was stolen from the parade ground during the lunch break, at a ceremonial review of the consolidated company preparing to leave for Gorno-Badakhshan. Although counterintelligence officers figured out who the thief was and found the automatic rifle by midnight, those on high decided that the paratroopers were not going to Tajikistan at all – and a company from the Sary-Ozek Motorized Rifle Division went

instead.. The paratroopers did not suffer any great casualties during the two years in Tajikistan other than some slightly wounded and missing persons during the first tour. The exception was Junior Lieutenant Dmitry Zabavkin, who received a penetrating bullet wound in the chest and lay for several hours under fire. The paratroopers were plain lucky, unlike the Shymkent interior troops, who lost 17 soldiers in a single battle in the winter of 1995.

The Kazakh military presence in Tajikistan consisted of reinforcing the roadblocks and border posts of the Russian Federation Kalaikhum border guard detachment. My battalion commander Major Sarzhanov, who spent time there, told me – “we were not burdened with armor or frontline aircraft support; we performed the job of ‘ceremonial bystanders’ with small arms, with no mountain equipment or training.”

It is incomprehensible how 900 soldiers from three countries could impact the situation along a 400-kilometer border with an eternally warring country.

For each month of the Tajik tour of duty, a draftee earned 15,000 tenge (\$319) and an officer received 20,000 (\$425). By way of comparison, my platoon commander salary for June 1994 was 1,800 tenge (\$38), and by June 1996 it had been raised to 5,000 tenge (\$106).



Ceremonial march of the 35th Guards SAAB's 1<sup>st</sup> AABat to mark the 77<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Airborne Forces. August 2, 2007

### **Otar Tours of Duty**

In 1993 the 35th Brigade's 3rd AABat, under the command of Guards Lieutenant Colonel Slyadnev, was assigned to enforce regulations in the Guards Garrison. By summer-fall 1993 a critical situation had arisen on the grounds of the units of the Guards Garrison, popularly known as the Otar training

center. Not just discipline, but also combat readiness and operating proficiency had taken a nosedive due to the mass exodus of Slav officers, who at that time made up 95% of the motorized rifle division's officer corps. With the disastrous shortage of officers, the very concept of security at military sites crumbled. Unemployed youth living in the nearby village of Otar sensed the servicemen's weak spot and staged an outright press of the military communities: a mob would come to the guardhouse, beat up the guards, beat up and rob any officer on his way to work, enter the barracks day or night, remove any belongings, extort money from the soldiers or simply thrash them "as a warm-up." The command decided that all weapons from the barracks should be handed over to the division depot for storage to keep them out of the wrong hands. Only the patrol commands in the Guards Garrison were left with weapons.

The 3rd AABat found the "perfect" answer. The methods used to straighten out the recalcitrant local population were adequate: a simple thrashing of any draft-age male civilian who appeared within a one-kilometer radius of the military communities for no good reason.

Two years later, in fall 1995, another "Sonderkommando" was sent to Otar at the request of the division commander to train his own commandant's company to impose order. {A "*Commandant's Company*" performs movement control, headquarters security, and quick reaction force (QRF) duties in Soviet/post-Soviet armies} This time 12 soldiers, led by a conscript sergeant named Moldashev, nicknamed "Shal" (Old Man) because he had been six years late for the draft, kept the 5,000-man garrison completely undisturbed by the civilian punks, using the same methods that had been used the first time around.

## **Stage Two: "The Clones are Advancing"**

Stage two began with rebel groups advancing into southern neighbor Kyrgyzstan in summer 1999 and spring 2000. Interestingly, the experienced rebel leader was a former Soviet paratrooper Juma Namangani (Jumabai Khojiyev, born 1969), who had fought in Afghanistan, first in the ranks of the Soviet Army and then in the ranks of the Taliban. And it turned out that our neighbor could not really respond seriously. The 10,000-man army, led by a lieutenant general, existed only on paper (which the subsequent overthrow of the head of state dramatically demonstrated). The hastily called up reservists with combat experience from Afghanistan were no longer in any shape to run around the mountains. The Kyrgyz finished off a hundred and fifty Islamists with great difficulty, despite numerical superiority and the support of artillery and Uzbek attack aircraft. Keeping a close watch on all this, our military leadership realized that if anything like that happened to us on a large scale, the 35th Brigade, the most combat capable, could not save the day alone. There clearly had to be more paratroopers and motorized riflemen, the workhorses of war.

It was decided that all the young army's hardships were behind it; money and manpower were available and the army could increase the complement of its "war elephants."





A soldier of the 38th SAAB- ILI-2006 training exercise

A Mobile Forces Command was set up in Almaty on July 6, 2000 by presidential order and was initially located, as logic dictated, near the Air Force Headquarters. A Kazakh peacekeeping battalion (Kazbat), consisting entirely of contract soldiers, was formed simultaneously on the basis of the 35th Brigade's 3rd AABat. Five years later the battalion had increased in size to a Kazakh brigade (KazBrig), but after seven more years it was once again reduced to a battalion. For four years, Kazbat sent a 29-man separate engineer platoon to Iraq on three-month rotations until 2008.

The Kazakh Mobile Forces were renamed the Airmobile Forces by presidential decree on November 12, 2003. The remnants of the former 203rd Zaporozh'e-Khingan Motorized Rifle Division (remnants because its regiments had been reduced to skeleton strength due to personnel and financial reasons during hard times) were located near

Karaganda in the form of a Storage Base. It was used to create two motorized rifle brigades in 1998, one of which remained near Karaganda, while the other was named the 2nd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (SMRB) and redeployed 200 kilometers north near Astana, by then the capital and in need of a decent courtier garrison befitting its status. There had been no battle units in Soviet Tselinograd (formerly Astana).

The 36th Separate Airborne Assault Brigade was formed on the basis of the 2nd SMRB in October 2003. The 37th Separate Airborne Assault Brigade was formed on the basis of the 173rd Sary-Ozek Motorized Rifle Division's Taldy-Kurgan Motorized Rifle Regiment in April 2003. The chief principle of the reorganization was the partial rotation of the motorized rifle officers and warrant officers of the units to 35th Brigade paratroop officers and warrant officers at every level. Actually, the 35th SAAB itself had emerged in 1948 during just such an "army cloning" on the basis of the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division's 3rd Airborne Parachute Regiment. In that same year, 2003, command of the Separate Reconnaissance Battalion and Separate Communications Battalion of the former Sary-Ozek MRD was handed over to the airmobile forces.

Later on, in 2004, control of the 1st SMRB, which at one time had been the Sary-Ozek MRD's Almaty Motorized Rifle Regiment, was reassigned to the airmobile forces command. The press initially called this unit under the new command the Airmobile Forces 38th SMRB (the official name has a completely different number – see below). Of late the press has sometimes been referring to it as the 38th Airborne Assault Brigade, although it is not a "jumper." *{The unit does not conduct airborne operations}*

The matter of the 38th Brigade's previous number is unclear. Before and after it was reassigned to the Airmobile Forces it was the 46th SMRB (in the Kazakhstan President's 2006 orders), but since 1997 it was officially called only the 1st SMRB (SMRBs and separate mechanized brigades in other cities and towns accordingly had sequential numbers – 2nd in Astana, 3rd in Sary-Ozek, 4th in Ust-Kamenogorsk, 5th in Taraz, 13th in Otar, etc.). The conclusion is simple: our military probably had and still has its own convenient unit numbering system, which differs from the official one. All

numbers in the Airmobile Forces are counted sequentially from the 35th, and in the infantry from the 3rd.

This 38th Brigade is well known because it was there that in 1997 the Kazakh Army tried contract service on a large scale for the first time (to be blunt, using coercion in some places). As happened in a similar case with the Pskov Airborne Division in Russia, the first time is always the hardest. By the time the 36th and 37th brigades were formed, our military had learned from all the mistakes in contract soldier recruitment and things improved. Both brigades are made up exclusively of contract soldiers. Airmobile Forces conscript soldiers also serve in the 38th SMRB, in addition to the 35th Brigade.

In fact, the simple truth is that it all came down to money and housing.

A special purpose unit, about which there is practically no press information, was created in Atyrau in 2005. It is known to be maritime. All the soldiers take combat scuba diving training courses. A video was shown where, at a meeting of intelligence officers from all Airmobile Forces, they were undergoing special training in the Ili River, which is noted for its rapid current.

Right now the 37th Taldy-Kurgan Brigade is considered the best trained and combat capable in the Airmobile Forces. It is an old Soviet truism that everything depends on the commander. The 37th Brigade commander is Almaz Jumakeyev, under whom I served as a platoon commander when he was still 2nd battalion commander in the 35th. For me personally he is a shining example of how intelligent, energetic, decent and dedicated a real officer should be. When I see officers like that in peacetime, I feel sorry that we are not fighting anyone. A plough that is not plowing rusts. And one does need to stay in shape.

## **Manning**

The last Soviet conscripts were discharged from the 35th in early 1993, after which the unit was manned by Kazakh recruits from all 19 regions of the republic. Altered public opinion about the army and widespread draft dodging sharply reduced the quality of recruits, who were underweight, chronically ill and physically weak, had a criminal history, were poorly educated, and spoke poor Russian (which was important back then). A joke went: a shepherd was grazing his sheep on the steppe; he went by the regional center for matches, he was stopped, his documents were checked, they shaved his head and took him off to the army. During those troubled times most sportsmen and athletic types were dodging the army and joining gangs. Senior Guards Lieutenant Tokhirov, Fire Support Company-2 Commander, said that in 1992 an SPG-9 {*grenade launcher*} crew could practically jog the six kilometers from their unit's location to the firing range with full gear and weapon without a rest, but two years later the company would be hard pressed to find anybody who could run that distance with no gear without stopping. Officers who had transferred to the Russian Airborne Forces and visited us from time to time spoke about the very same problems.

Recruiters tried to select the best of the best at the regional military recruiting offices. {*In the Soviet/Kazakh system draftee/conscripts are pooled at "regional military recruiting offices"; then recruiters from the different ministries (MoD, MVD, etc.) select the conscripts for service in a particular branch.*}

Unlike Soviet times, the 35th Brigade command decided to send its own doctor or paramedic along with every buying officer for better screening. The old competitors, as in Soviet times, were border troop recruiters; the new ones were from the Republican Guard (its Almaty and Astana regiments are counterparts of the Kremlin regiment). Many of the conscripts recruited to the unit in the early 1990s would probably only have been accepted by a construction battalion in Soviet times. *{In Soviet times non-Russian-speaking conscripts were often placed in road construction units, which, in general, usually received the worst draftees (conscripts)}* Another 7-8 percent were weeded out and transferred to other units after a two-month probation in entry-level training companies in the brigades. *{Since there is no centralized training system for conscripts, conscripts usually receive rudimentary basic training through “entry- level training companies” at the brigade level before they are pushed down to the battalions for additional training.}*



35th Guards SAAB at the ILI-2006 training exercises.

Unlike the 1990s, the conscript situation has changed drastically for the better over the last six years. We now have a larger pool to choose from. There are four reasons for this. First, the length of the draft has been shortened (first to one and a half years, then to one year). Second, the new Law on the Civil Service gives those who have completed compulsory military service priority when entering the civil service in a security or law enforcement agency. Third, there is better discipline and provisioning in the military. Fourth, there is less need for conscripts due to the larger number of contract soldiers in the army. For example, only 60 of 1,500 draft-age candidates were taken in the spring 2006 draft at the Akmolinsk Oblast Schuchinsky District Defense Board (as enlistment offices are now called). The father of one recruit said that each of them gave the enlistment officer a bribe of about 500 American dollars for the right to be a soldier. It costs more to become an officer. In 2007, the son of a friend of mine had to pay three times that much to pass the medical examination and be guaranteed admission to the Almaty Higher Combined-Arms Command Academy (AVOKU) *{now named Almaty Institute of Ground Forces}*. In fall 2007 the Defense Minister noted that “the number of employees of all Defense Boards is almost the same as the number of draftees.”



The commanders engaged in their own rivalry within brigades for the right to select from among the incoming draftees. The unspoken rule was that the communication company commander and the commandant's platoon commander had the right to take the cream of the crop, and only then could the battalion commanders select the "recces" for their reconnaissance platoons. This practice was evident on Airborne Forces Day in 1995, when the Communications Company, under the keen direction of its master sergeant, Guards Petty Officer Vasilenko, demonstrated its version of the "ballet" (exhibition hand-to-hand combat) ahead of reconnaissance's traditional "ballet."

The sergeant situation is more problematic. There was nowhere to get them from because there were no airborne forces training centers in the country in Soviet times. They used the construction battalion method of gradually promoting privates on the "powerful – intelligent – strong-minded – diligent" principle. It is always hard to find all these qualities in one person. In 1995, on the initiative of Guards Senior Lieutenant Almaz Jumakeyev, 2nd battalion deputy commander (now the 37th Brigade commander), a sergeant company was put together comprising the spring draftees who had been through the entry-level training company. The sergeant company men underwent two months of intensive training under a Soviet-style sergeant school program for squad leader positions. The experiment was successful: the sergeant company graduates distinguished themselves in later service. However, the unit command decided to end the practice, perhaps because the sergeant company required too many officers as cadre, and officers were in short supply. *{Training is primarily an officer responsibility in post-Soviet armies}* Some artillery sergeants were sent in from the Otar training center. At present all sergeants are either contract soldiers from among the "demobees" *{This is in reference to conscripts who have been released from their mandatory service term, and have volunteered to continue service as a contract NCO}* or graduates of the three year program at the Schuchinsk Cadet Corps, which trains future assistant officers for the entire Kazakh Army. *{Contract NCOs are often referred to as "officer assistants"}*

The unit command decided to train its own drivers, including armored vehicle drivers, rather than recruit them from other training centers. After every entry-level training company graduation, they selected recruits with driver's licenses for two months in an RDC (Rookie Driver Company), which the brigade called "jerrycans." The training ended with the traditional 100-kilometer forced march of the brigade's wheeled materiel towards the Karaganda Highway.

Faced with officer recruitment problems, in 1993 the Kazakh Ministry of Defense resorted to a practice that had already been twice tried and tested in Soviet times. "Mamleyev courses" were set up at the Konev Almaty Combined-Arms Academy, as in the early 1970s, to train junior lieutenants for military specialty No. 021001 – "motorized rifle platoon commander." Theory training took place at AVOKU and then driving, shooting and tactics were taught at the Otar training center. Since mostly experienced warrant officers and contract soldiers were enrolled in the courses, the officers who graduated from them were generally decent and intelligent, and understood soldiers well. One Mamleyev graduate rose from a deputy fire support company commander to deputy battalion commander, and later to deputy artillery brigade commander for ESL [educational and socio-legal work—*Trans.*] in ten years.

The second step to plug the personnel hole was another tried and tested Soviet method: a two-year call up of college graduates ("suits") who had completed reserve officer training at civilian colleges. Instead of diplomas the military recruiting offices handed them an order to show up at a particular unit to serve. Since 1996 the "suits" have been "drafted" for three years. These men have it the

hardest. They have no service experience or military toughening, and the soldiers openly despise them, although some “suits” did make a career of it. (Of course, no one will ever outdo the career of the Soviet Union’s chief “suit” – Army General Kvashin, former Russian Federation Chief of Staff.)

There were also “suits” like me who did compulsory army service, graduated from college and came to the 35th Brigade voluntarily under contract. I can proudly say that I am the first “suit” in the 35th who has been entrusted with leading a guard detail. Toward the end of my first detail an incident occurred: realizing that I was not paying attention, the escort guard beat up a prisoner in the cell and he ended up in intensive care. From 1992 on, all new officer recruits to the 35th were graduates of AVOKU, or, as military people usually call it, the “Red Batyrs [military leaders—*Trans.*] School. Only Kazakh graduates of the specialist Ryazan “Circus” School [nickname for RVVDKU (Ryazan Higher Paratrooper Command Academy)—*Trans.*] came to do service. As of 1995, 150 of the brigade’s officers were RVVDKU graduates, and another ten were graduates of the paratrooper faculties from the Novosibirsk Political, Ryazan Communication, Ryazan Automobile, and Kolomensky Artillery Schools.

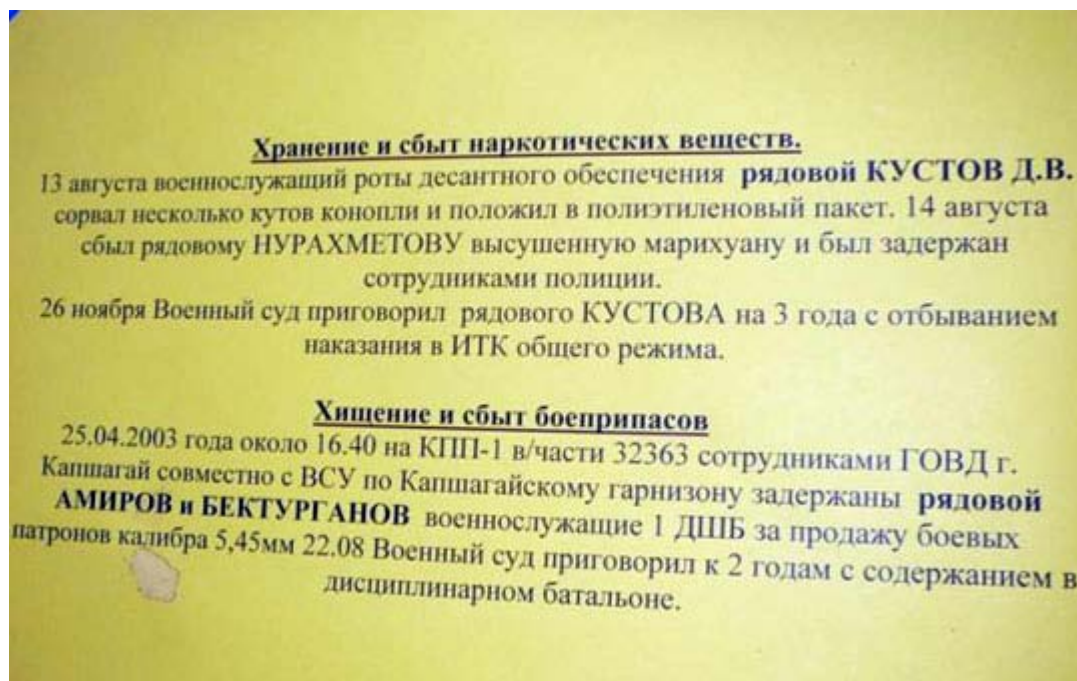
The Almaty Institute of Ground Forces (formerly AVOKU) presently has among its 11 faculties a paratrooper faculty that trains battle platoon commanders for the Airmobile Forces. They also train artillery officers. The Almaty Institute of Electronics and Communications trains communications officers and air defense officers. By the way, in Soviet times AVOKU was second after RVVDKU in the supply of line platoon officers to the Airborne Forces and GRU special purpose units. This mostly applied to airborne assault units. There apparently was no specialization in the training, as, for example, at Blagoveshensky Higher Combined-Arms Academy, which trained naval infantry platoon officers. The most famous AVOKU graduate now in the Russian Federation Airborne Forces is Guards Colonel Yuri Em, Hero of Russia and former commander of the 247th Airborne Parachute Regiment.

In the mid-1990s, in the 35th Brigade, as throughout the Kazakh Army, any old AVOKU platoon commander with a clean six-month service record would become a deputy company commander, six months later – a company commander, and so on. In our remote motorized rifle, tank and artillery garrisons (like Ayaguz, Otar, Georgievka, etc.), a green lieutenant would be given a company or battery right away, and a battalion or division six months later. Guards Captain Yanochkin, my battalion commander (who is so short that he only got into RVVDKU on his third try and who is now commander of the 12th Separate Special Purpose Brigade (SSPB) in Asbest), came straight out and said this at a battalion officers’ meeting: “Our problem is that we’re too young.” All our brigade commanders were appointed to their posts when they were 32-34 years old, just like during the Great Patriotic War.

## **Discipline and Regulations**

USSR Army Regulations stated in Russian that information about the moral and psychological situation and the state of discipline in the military is a military and state secret. This Soviet principle was maintained in the Kazakh Army throughout the 1990s through inertia, but long lives the spirit of the steppe: we have started to wash our dirty linen in public. Those who do not believe this can read the Kazakhstan Ministry of Defense online newspaper. Every fresh screw-up and incident is there for all to see.

For a long time the 35th Brigade was a model of how things should not be, with its vicious hazing, clannishness, theft, armed robbery of Kapchagai residents and servicemen of other units, and nationalism



Board of shame in the 35th SAAB

For example, from February 1995 to February 1996 the 35th Brigade, with no one to fight and, as they say in the military, “going nuts from the horrors of peacetime,” lost ten men forever. In the 2nd Fire Support Company alone there were five deaths: two hung themselves, one shot himself on guard duty, one detainee was shot by an escort guard when he tried to escape from a cell (this is the East: a year after returning to civilian life the escort guard would be shot dead by the detainee’s brother), and a draftee sergeant shot a 2nd FSC master sergeant on the rifle range for calling him a baby. The next commander of the 2nd FSC seriously proposed calling in a mullah to bless the company. By way of comparison, in summer-fall 1988 the 108th MRD’s Bagram reconnaissance battalion suffered four combat casualties, one of whom was killed by one of his own in a roadblock accident.

Hardly a week went by without people going AWOL. As of fall 1994, 250 soldiers in the brigade were listed as AWOL. Old timers, as well as rookies, were running away. I know because I myself served as a military investigator. The stream of deserters only ebbed in 1996. Nowadays there are 4-5 AWOLs per brigade per year; that norm is similar to the days of the well-heeled Soviet Army.

Soviet political officers were renamed educational and socio-legal (ESL) officers in the Kazakh Army. ESL officers (“Trouble Officers” as soldiers jokingly called them) did nothing but write up criminal cases. According to an investigator in a garrison military prosecutor’s office, in 1995 every fifth person in the Otar Disciplinary Battalion was from the 35th Brigade. The worst ones were from our “Texas” – South Kazakhstan Oblast (hot-blooded southerners) and draftees from Karaganda Oblast (Karaganda has historically been the country’s criminal capital since the GULAG).

It was risky to move around at night in the brigade itself. The 6th company commander, Guards Senior Lieutenant Konstantin Sergeyevich Fokin, a graduate of the Ryazan “Circus” (now deputy commander for airborne training of the 12th SSPB), master of sports candidate in boxing, never had his pistol holstered when he was on duty and doing his night rounds. He kept it in his coat or pants pocket so that he could use it fast. And he made no secret of this.

Every spring and summer it was the same old story with the stripping down of automotive materiel in the wheeled vehicle fleet and in officer housing. The “grandfathers” {*conscripts who had served one and a half to two years*} were preparing for discharge, and the “elephants” {*new conscripts*} were struggling to raise money for the sending off the “grandfathers” into civilian life. {*Senior conscripts would routinely extort money from junior conscripts.*} As a result, in May 1995 I was no longer a platoon commander but a minor general – “in charge of three bodies.” These were the bodies of three stripped down UAZ all-terrain vehicles of the 2nd Machine Gun Platoon, which I had not got around to handing over to the new company commander. The previous company commander was doing time for rape.

The unit command was forced to use a special tactic with demobees. Because most of the demobees, once they left the compound and tasted freedom, would start boozing to ease the stress of hard military service and cause mayhem “with one eye on the cash register and the guardhouse” as the saying goes, the brigade command decided that after the form-up at unit headquarters and the issuing of travel passes, all demobees would immediately be loaded onto trucks and taken to Almaty-1 railway station (65 kilometers from the unit) under officer supervision, and only then would their military service record cards be handed to them. To prevent the demobees from discrediting the noble rank of guards paratrooper, they were not issued uniforms; they traveled home in civilian clothes, whose origin was of little concern to the commanders and which were procured by the “elephants.” However, almost half of the demobees could be found on the unit’s premises the following night: they would return from Almaty to recover belongings they had hidden in the barracks and to “squeeze” money out of remaining conscripts.

Conscript soldiers see the army as a little lopsided: when I became an officer I came to understand well the meaning of the officer saying “Wherever you kiss a soldier you’ll hit him in the ass.” As soon as you were nice to a conscript soldier or were the least bit friendly with him, he would get brazen and you could automatically expect him to get into trouble. Officers’ conscious caution when dealing with the rank-and-file, always reminding them of their position, may have seemed arrogant to the soldiers (which is why they were called “abortions” and “jackals” in the Soviet Army), but now seemed perfectly reasonable to me. There can be no other way to communicate in a conscript army. And don’t bother with the Israeli army examples – that is an army of a single nation with a single religion and with a common, conscious mission for all – to survive in the Arab world.

Given the general state of affairs in the country and in the army, officers were not all that different from soldiers either. (To be honest, the author admits that he himself was not an ideal officer – 18 punitive reprimands and severe reprimands in two years vs. two commendations.) In the 35th Brigade in the mid-1990s it was considered normal for an officer to use physical force on a soldier in the presence of witnesses. Guards Colonel Abraimov, Deputy Brigade Commander for ESL, asked my soldier – “Do the officers beat you?” The soldier replied frankly – “No, but our company commander is a boxer.” On the other hand, many officers used to quote a respected officer, Guards Major Khairullah Ulyasov, 1st battalion commander (an RVVDKU graduate who fought in the 56th SAAB in Afghanistan) – “One blow to a soldier’s melon can replace six hours of political studies.”



At the time this was indeed a more effective means of teaching a lesson than going by the book. I was regularly detailed as guard commander throughout my two years of contract service in the 35th Brigade, and as I remember it, the disciplinary cell was always full, as was the list of potential detainees drawn up by unit commanders who wanted to reform their subordinates.

It was a widespread practice for commanders to partially or fully embezzle soldiers' pay. It was also common for soldiers to be used for jobs unrelated to military service.

A special word about drunkenness among 35th Brigade officers and warrant officers back then; For some reason I noticed the officers and warrant officers from other units (sappers, communications men, missile men, paramedics) living in the same officer quarters or in the same officer hostel where I lived. I rarely ever saw these officers drunk or disorderly, much unlike the officers in our unit. I personally accomplished a range of feats when drunk, which made me wince with shame when I recalled them sober. My fellow soldiers enthusiastically discussed in detail the fights and altercations of our drunk officers in the Kapchagai restaurants. This subject was often raised with respect to specific misconduct in the Court of Officer Honor, whose presiding judge was for a long time the abstemious and respected Guards Lieutenant Colonel Tairov, Deputy Brigade Commander for Airborne Training and AVOKU graduate, who had started out as a lieutenant in the 35th Brigade in Kotbus. Brigade Commander Guards Colonel Elamanov often gave practical advice and guidance to disorderly officers: "You're drunk. You realize you're losing control. Squeeze yourself into a corner and keep quiet and be still while you imagine you're Hercules. Once you've felt your strength, stand up and march off to sleep without a word."

In the Soviet Army (except for service in Afghanistan) I never once saw a drunken officer on unit grounds. In the early to mid-1990s, it was normal in the 35th Brigade for officers to sit around drinking vodka in the company office or battalion headquarters.

There is good reason why paratroop officers' length of service is as short as that of pilots – that branch of service is high stress and under constant moral and physical pressure, even in peacetime. It's kind of hard to always be clenching your butt and fists.

I never saw an officer enter a military unit's premises in civilian clothes in the Soviet Army. The regulations stated that an officer must be in uniform on a unit's premises regardless of the time or whether or not he is on duty. In the early to mid-1990s officers and warrant officers definitely had a very relaxed attitude on this score in the evening and at nighttime.

In 1997 the army started to crack down. Many officers and warrant officers I knew served jail time for using physical force, embezzlement, selling weapons and ammunition, etc. A new American-style structure – a Military Police Corps – was set up to investigate and prevent wrongdoing by servicemen. It has broad powers and does not report to the garrison command. Perhaps because of the profound impression which movies about the Great Patriotic War made on our military leadership in childhood, our military police, like the Gestapo and SS at one time, wore a nonnavy-nonmilitary black. Tipsy officers and warrant officers stopped walking around Kapchagai in military uniform.

If information in the press can be trusted, the Kazakh Brigade was leading the pack in mess-ups. It is absolutely incomprehensible how they managed to let themselves go and sink to this level. The unit is supposedly made up entirely of contract soldiers, and not just ordinary soldiers but select, well-

taken-care-of and well-trained ones. In summer 2007, essentially admitting that the unit command was corrupt and the personnel were in a bad way, the Ministry of Defense and the Airmobile Forces command downsized the KazBrig to a KazBat and redeployed it to the 38th Brigade's premises in Almaty.

As is the case throughout the Kazakh Army, discipline among Airmobile Forces contract soldiers is now on a level with that of Soviet Army cadet sergeants. This is because only two call-ups are present in a unit at any one time (since service is just one year) and because of the professionalism of the sergeants (who in our army are exclusively contract soldiers or graduates of the Shchuchinsk Cadet Corps). 35th

Progress has also been made with discipline among officers. In the early to mid-1990s, if an officer was absent for days painting the town red, he would be slapped with a punitive or severe reprimand, confined to barracks, saddled with duty every other day, and lose his annual bonus. Young lieutenants would sometimes engage in this kind of behavior because, under still valid Soviet law, there was no other way to get out of the army (an officer applying for early discharge could wait up to six months). Rare cases would end with dismissal for incompetence or discrediting the officer corps. Since 2000 the prestige and salary of officer service has been rising steadily. The military is better provided with housing and it is harder to gain admission to military academies, which thus provides a better quality officer candidate. Men are making a career of the military. You can be kicked out of the service for what used to be considered child's play – like being repeatedly late. The concept and article “Absent Without Leave,” which used to apply only to conscript soldiers, now applies to officers as well. The arrival of a new civilian Minister of Defense, Danial Akhmetov, in early 2007 provided a powerful impetus for instituting order in the military. He is a profoundly decent and very reasonable and energetic man. He immediately looked at the competency of the Airmobile Forces Supreme Commander's reserve and pointed out real shortcomings.

### **Armament and Equipment**

When it comes to weapons, they were all inherited from the Soviet Army. The 37th Brigade has the standard-issue weapons of the former Taldy-Kurgan Motorized Rifle Regiment (MRR), with its BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles, MT-LB multipurpose armored vehicles, and PS30 BM-21 Grad rocket launchers. The 38th has the weapons of the former Almaty MRR, with its BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, BTR-80 amphibious APCs, Shilka self-propelled antiaircraft gun (ZSU-23-4), T-72 tanks and Gvozdika SAU self-propelled guns. The 35th also has Soviet era leftovers – BTR-80s in the 1st AABat; other battalions have GAZ-66 trucks; the artillery division had D-30 howitzers at first, then 120mm mortar launchers, then both.

The exception is the “courtier” 36th Brigade, which, in addition to T-72s and BMP-2s, has new BTR-80A APCs and Land Rover Defenders remade into gun trucks. A new lot of BTR-80As came in this year to rearm other brigades.

Kazbrig-Kazbat has been equipped and stocked entirely to NATO standards – from three Humvee versions to helmets (plastic), shoes, body armor, uniforms, mine detectors, glasses, etc. Only the AK-47s and modernized Kalashnikov machine guns (PKMs) were left as is.

The Kazakh Airmobile Forces have no air-droppable materiel or military transport planes. In winter 2004, during the regular rotation of the sapper squad from Kazbrig, then Defense Minister

Lieutenant General of Aviation Mukhtar Altynbekov promised a major procurement of Il-76TD planes, but this has not yet been accomplished. Only a squadron of MI-17s has been procured. We are putting the cart before the horse here. Current Defense Minister Danial Akhmetov, a man of deeds and words, has promised to improve military aircraft in all areas.

Airmobile Forces communications provisioning has changed for the better: they now have Icom or Motorola trunking radios. Let me say right off the bat that these are the semi-civilian police versions that Chechen militants used to walk around with rather than the Motorola three-kilometer exclusively-for-the-field army radios that are usually carried by the military, say the American Army or the Bundeswehr (dust-moisture-shock-resistant, with scramblers and long-life batteries). At least these are not ancient Soviet R-138s, R-158s or R-159s. All combat personnel in the 37th Brigade (as the most combat capable) have radios. The Soviet word “runner” has been forgotten. In other brigades all officers, warrant officers and sergeants have radios. All units have GPS receivers, although, as a former artillery spotter, I think that we should not let the contemporary mindset relax us and should continue to train artillerymen using their grandfathers’ PAB-2M periscopic aiming circles. The outfitting situation has changed. 37th Brigade contract soldiers have been issued weatherproof clothing because they are deployed in the foothills. 35th Brigade conscript soldiers have not worn high boots for six years – only ankle boots. They do not carry Soviet cartridge pouches, but rather have ammunition vests.

## **Table of Organization**

The structure of the 35th Brigade changed radically with the outflow of officers in the early 1990s. The 4th Battalion was eliminated. By summer 1994 mortar batteries were eliminated from battalions and only restored toward 1998, when the artillery officer shortage had been resolved. Due to the weak control of reconnaissance company commander Guards Captain Kiselev (an RVVDKU graduate), the reconnaissance company personnel, duly made up of only sportsmen, became virtually unmanageable and by spring 1994 the unit command decided to eliminate it, scattering the soldiers among combat companies and reckoning that three reconnaissance platoons were enough for the battalions. The 35th Brigade’s reconnaissance company was reconstituted in 1999.

Although our bright bulbs in the Defense Ministry are of the Soviet mold, we continue to accept freebies from the Yankees in the form of hammers and helicopters for peacekeepers, in order to maintain outward political loyalty [sic]. That is why purely American innovations were introduced into our army such as the aforementioned Military Police Corps, a Sergeant System (Company Sergeant, Battalion Sergeant, etc., up to Army Sergeant), a Joint Staff Committee instead of a General Staff, dropping divisions in favor brigade formations, NATO-standard outfitting, etc. {*The Kazakhs have also adopted a regional command structure, based loosely on the U.S. Combatant Command system. Since the author’s original publication in 2008, Kazakhstan has abandoned the Joint Staff Committee, and has returned to the General Staff system.*}

The new table of organization combines separate platoons attached to battalion headquarters into companies – a fire support company (machine gun+antitank +air defense+grenade launcher platoons) and a headquarters company (communications platoon+logistics platoon+reconnaissance platoon). Fagots [weapon system] will replace SPG-9s in the fire support companies’ antitank platoons. {*In the Soviet system, companies as well as some platoons would report directly to the battalion, unlike the US system where companies typically only report to battalions*}

After eliminating a whole battalion from the brigades, in 1993 they started on the battalions themselves. By fall 1994 all that was left of three airborne assault companies in the battalions were one full-strength company, a second that was reduced to a platoon, and a third that was reduced to a maintenance group (drivers). Together with the fully staffed headquarters company and fire support company, the battalions ended up having just three companies and one platoon instead of the TO requirement of five companies and a mortar battery.

The artillery battalions ended up in the same neutered situation. Only one firing battery and a command and control battery were fully staffed. *{In the Soviet system, an artillery battalion had a standard complement of approximately 18 guns.}*

With the 1998 reappearance of mortar batteries in battalions (four 82-mm mortar and three SPG-9 crews in each) and with their fire power deemed sufficient, the fire support companies were disbanded. PKMs from the machine gun platoon, antitank guided missiles from the antitank platoon, and AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers from the grenade-launcher platoon were distributed among the combat companies. The antiaircraft missile platoon's weapons went to the antiaircraft missile artillery battery (ZRAB).

In 1998 the 35th Brigade created a heavy machine gun company (RTP), which is equipped with six NSB-12.7 heavy machine guns. The largest company in the brigade is the logistics support company ("company of the well supported" in military lingo), whose staff as of 1996 included 110 officers, warrant officers and soldiers. The smallest company is the paratrooper logistics company ("wild monkey company" in military lingo) [in Russian the acronyms for both are the same (RDO)—*Trans.*] – 12 soldiers and roughly the same number of officers, warrant officers and contract soldiers.

Prior to fall of last year (2007) extra-agency security forces (EASF) existed in the table of organization of all brigades. *{Likely a reference to the practice of placing small KGB elements, or their successor organizations in post-Soviet states, into TOEs of regimental-/brigade-sized units and above, a common practice in post Soviet armies.}* These were size of two squads, all contract soldiers, a third of them women. They guarded the brigades' military facilities, thereby releasing combat units from guard duty for more thorough combat training. Prior to that they did away with mess duty by hiring civilian firms. However, the current Defense Minister has correctly decided that his predecessor was not quite right, and considers that guard duty is also basically a type of combat training that fosters responsibility in servicemen and imparts the habits of vigilance and endurance necessary in war. His decision eliminated the EASF and returned guard duty to the combat units. By summer 2007 1st AABat and 2nd AABat were fully manned in the 35th Brigade with a headquarters company plus three airborne assault companies plus mortar battery TO. 3rd AABat has been half-manned. The artillery division and all other special units (chemical protection company, maintenance company, material support company, antiaircraft missile artillery battery, engineer company, etc.) have been fully manned.





Mountain training- Scouts in the Talgar mountain pass – 3,200 m.

The 37th Taldy-Kurgan Brigade has a different structure. All three of its battalions, artillery battalion and special units have been fully manned. All battalions have BMP-1 APCs and all personnel are contract soldiers, which is why the battalion mortar batteries have a more respectable six 120 mm mortar crews. The 37th Brigade's headquarters companies do not have a reconnaissance platoon, the rationale being that, if need be, it will be easy for a battalion of professional contract soldiers to detail a trained reconnaissance group from any combat company.

The 36th Astana Brigade has much the same structure and is also made up of contract soldiers. The difference lies in the battalions' materiel – the 36<sup>th</sup> is all BTR-80As, the aforementioned Land Rover Defenders and BMP-2s.

The Airmobile Forces 38th Almaty SMRB is just a "Soviet-style motorized regiment." Two motorized rifle battalions – one with BMP-2s and the other with BTR-80s, a tank battalion with T-72s, an artillery division with Gvozdika SAU 2S1 self-propelled guns, a ZRAB with Shilkas, etc.

In spring 1994 the Manning Document of the 35th Brigade's AABat called for 447 soldiers, but that number is now 369. For the 37th Brigade it is 318.

Unlike the Soviet Army, where the battalion-regiment-brigade TO was spelled out in Defense Ministry instructions for the five-year plan after five-year plan, this is more flexible in the Kazakh Airmobile Forces. In coordination with Airmobile Forces command and control, the brigade commander himself draws up the optimal TO based on time and capability. Various options are considered and experience is being gained.

In point of fact, as of now no Kazakh Airmobile Forces brigade matches its name – they should rather be called separate regiments. However, as Defense Minister Danial Akhmetov said in January

2008, “the number and strength of combat units will soon be brought up to the optimal level,” which I took to mean that brigades in name will become brigades in fact.

I also think that the name “brigade” itself is completely wrong – the descriptor “separate” needs to go. Brigades by definition are separate formations – they are not part of a division or corps (not counting the Yankees and Chapayev). This was appropriate in Soviet times, when there was nothing but divisions. Brigades (separate airborne assault, separate motorized rifle, separate tank, separate air defense missile, separate chemical protection, separate logistics, etc.) were directly subordinate to military district headquarters or army headquarters (abroad). The Kazakh Army has no divisions left – only brigades, and not enough of them to deserve the pompous title of “separate.” All our airborne forces taken together are the size of one airborne division, which means it can have just one major general; however, our airborne forces have a whopping two major generals.

### **Airborne Training**

Airborne training is still as it was in Soviet times for incoming draftees: the same instructional scheme, the same two-week classes at the airborne facility, and the same mandatory two jumps from a 20-meter tower; the same first jump without a weapon and a second with – and then after the draftees have been assigned to units, a jump in full gear – with the standard weapons, an RD-54 paratrooper pack and OZK all-service protective gear. The 35th Brigade’s standard landing area is a level steppe, two kilometers by four kilometers, among rolling hills, five kilometers from the brigade’s location.

The location is known for unpredictable wind gusts at any time of year, often the cause of dragging and injury. In December 1995, during his first jump, a young draftee of mine lost his head, forgot about the soft lock, and was dragged a half kilometer on the ground so that no one could catch up with him. The landing area supervisor sent a truck to cut him off, which stopped the canopy.

Also due to the wind, a covered windproof hangar was built at the brigade’s airborne facility in 1998 to make it easier to pack parachutes. Prior to that, since the days of the 22nd Brigade, “brick and stone packing” had been used in open areas. Stones and bricks were brought from every corner to hold down the canopy that was being folded.

Prior to 1997 the 35th Brigade used to jump from the Almaty Helicopter Regiment’s MI-6 and MI-8 helicopters. From 1994 onwards they only jumped from MI-8s. They boarded the helicopters beside the drop area. In July 1994 they began to jump from AN-12s. They boarded the aircraft at the 149<sup>th</sup> Bomber Regiment’s airfield in Zhetygen (previously Nikolayevka), 30 kilometers from Kapchagai. Guards Lieutenant Colonel Tairov, Deputy Brigade Commander for Airborne Training, said that the 35th Brigade had resumed airplane jumps after an 8-year break. Nighttime jumps were only made until 1994.

By a certain logic, all the landing accidents in our Airborne Forces involved mostly officers, while the serious fatalities happened to young recruits on the very first jump. Overlapping parachute cords placed Guards Captain Yanochkin in a critical situation, which he managed to fix just above the ground. Lieutenant Colonel Almaz Jumakeyev recently faced a dangerous situation when he collided with another officer in the air. In summer 1994 an artillery division captain’s foot went into a gopher hole as he landed and he suffered a compound leg fracture. That same summer, after watching athletic skydivers, my friend, Guards Junior Lieutenant Nurgazinov, decided to separate in

a non-fetal position and descended spread-eagled. One leg ended up in the parachute cords, and he landed on the other leg in the gymnastic arabesque position. During a drop from an AN-12 on May 15, 1996, Guards Lieutenant Filistovich pulled the ring too early, without waiting for the equipment to operate, causing Deputy Platoon Commander Guards Sergeant Bakayev, who separated behind him, to fly into his parachute cords. They had to cut a total of 11 cords on both canopies in order to separate. Guards Lieutenant Colonel Tairov described a critical situation in bitter cold when he was forced to use the reserve parachute when the primary one failed. The investigation showed that condensate of unknown origin had frozen on the lock mechanism (veteran paratroopers say that this can happen if a packed parachute is briefly taken into a heated room or is carried in a vehicle cab).

Our Airmobile Forces have had only two fatal jumps in the 16 years of their existence – in December 1997 and July 2006. Both were the first jump of a young recruit, and both were the fault of the jumpmaster. Fellow servicemen who are still on active duty asked me to leave out the details. Retired officers say that this is a normal fatality rate.

At present, conscript soldiers complete 6-7 jumps in a year (that is, for the entire length of service), as do contract soldiers. There were 50-100% more jumps in the early to mid-1990s.

All the females in our Airmobile Forces, from medical officers to signal operators and civilian clerks at brigade headquarters, jump. Female mess cooks used to jump as well. A funny case is the extreme jump of Olga Boiko, my contemporary and a 2nd AABat clerk, in the summer of 1996. She was not allowed to jump because she weighed some 300 lbs. But after I jokingly called her “the 2nd AAB’s only non-jumping element,” she applied in writing for permission to jump. Permission was granted out of good intentions, since her weight was right at the maximum allowable load for the D-6 series 4 system. Two paratroopers had a hard time pulling the parachute harness on her. Her first and only jump was by the book; they say with a straight face that the helicopter jerked when she jumped. {epic}

Since 2005, our Airmobile Forces have tested and passed into service Russian-made motoparaplanes and parachute-steerable Centaurs for its reconnaissance units. As should be the case, they were first tested by Guards Lieutenant Colonel Artur Vasilyevich Balabanov, Director of the Airmobile Forces Paratrooper Service (an RVVDKU graduate with a real passion for his work, who started his lieutenant career in 1993 as a reconnaissance platoon commander in the 35th Brigade’s 1st AABat.)

## **Training Exercises**

From its emergence in 1992 and up until 2000, the Kazakh Army did not conduct any medium-scale (by Soviet standards) military training exercises, much less large-scale ones, not even regiment on regiment. There was only one reason for this: cost. In the new Kazakh Army the 35th Brigade’s first military exercise was the participation of an airborne assault company from the 2nd AABat, led by Captain Yuri Anatolevich Yanochkin, in the Ayaguz Tank Division’s tactical exercises in June 1994. The parachute jumps were canceled at the last minute due to a strong wind. Defense Minister Lieutenant General Sagadat Nurmagambetov, Hero of the Soviet Union, observed the operation and said “the company demonstrated a model assault on notional enemy positions with helicopter landings under tank cover.” During a landing on hilly terrain, heavy dust pollution in the drop area caused the pilot of one of the helicopters to miscalculate the hover height. As a result, the lead soldier jumped from a height of 5 meters with full combat gear, broke his spine and was crippled.

The second such exercise was the 1st AABat's August 15, 1994 parachute drop from an AN-12 onto the Otar Training Division's firing range during division exercises attended, for the first time, by the head of state.

Prior to summer 1996 the history of command post exercises and field training exercises consisted of rebuffing the aggression of China's People's Liberation Army rogue units that had invaded Kazakhstan and friendly Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) countries, although the Chinese leadership itself had been regarded as friendly toward us. Since the first Chechen War, the chief enemy of the Central Asian republics has been rebel groups.

In summer 1998 the 35th Brigade's 2nd AABat participated in the Southern Shield 1998 international exercises in Kyrgyzstan, where the 4th Company parachuted.

In spring 1999 the 35th Brigade's 1st AABat participated in Southern Shield 2000 in Tajikistan.

The 35th Brigade's 1st AABat and for the first the 37th Taldy-Kurgan Brigade's 1st AABat participated in Rubezh 2004 in Kyrgyzstan. These two battalions are officially part of the CSTO Collective Rapid Deployment Force (CRDF), the successor of the Central Asian Battalion. The same forces participated in Rubezh 2005 in Tajikistan. To save money, not the full battalions but only one company from each battalion went to the Rubezh exercises abroad.

Rubezh 2006 will take place on Kazakhstan's Caspian coast. The Rubezh script is always the same: a large Islamic rebel group has taken over a mountain village (judging by the video, for some reason it is always on a mountain slope – must be more convenient to fire at and observe it), and after artillery softening-up and air strikes, it is methodically destroyed by a joint strike of CRDF motorized rifle and parachute units. During Rubezh 2006 the exercise script will include a naval component – Russia's 77th Naval Infantry Brigade and Kazakhstan's Atyrau Coast Guard Brigade (a.k.a. the Naval Infantry Brigade) will strike the Wahhabis from the sea.

The internal ILI-2005 and ILI-2006 Kazakh training exercises included the same 35th and 37th Brigades, Kazbrig, the 38th SMRB, the 232nd Engineer Brigade, frontline aviation units and many others. The exercises involved scouts crossing in rubber boats to reconnoiter a stronghold on the hostile bank of the Ili River, by conducting a forced river crossing by assault teams in amphibious armored personnel carriers and armored transport vehicles with air and artillery fire support, and eventually capturing a staging area. Then the 232nd Engineer Brigade set up a 250-meter pontoon ferry, followed by movement of the units in combat vehicles, including 38th Brigade tanks and a cavalry squadron from the 5th SMRB's mountain battalion (our army does have such forgotten elements). Prior to the Ili exercises, pontoon ferries had not been built in Kazakhstan for almost 18 years, just as there had been no forced river crossings in amphibious armored vehicles. The Defense Minister himself got behind the wheel of a Kazbrig Humvee, drove onto a 232nd Engineer Brigade caterpillar amphibious vehicle and crossed the river.

A lot has been written about Peace Mission 2007 in Chebarkul; to repeat – the 37th Brigade's 1st AA Company participated under Brigade Commander Almaz Jumakeyev.

**FMSO Commentary.** *The Kazakh Airmobile Forces is part of the Kazakh Ground Forces Command that is located in the capital, Astana, and is divided into four Regional Commands headquartered in Atyrau, Karaganda, Taraz, and Semipalatinsk. The Kazakh Regional*



*Commands operationally control the majority of Ministry of Defense Troops in their areas of responsibility with the exception of troops belonging to the Artillery and Rocket Forces Command and the Airmobile Forces Command. The Airmobile Forces command currently has four brigades: the 35th SAAB at Kapchagai, the 36th SAAB at Astana, the 37th at Taldy-Kurgan, and the 38th SAAB at Almaty.*

*The 35th SAAB is closely aligned with another Airmobile Forces Command unit, the Kazakh Peacekeeping Brigade or KAZBRIG. The unit consists of one fully formed battalion, one partial battalion, and one battalion “on paper.” KAZBRIG has hosted the NATO peacekeeping exercise “Steppe Eagle” annually since 2006. In 2008, NATO assessed the unit as having a “level of interoperability” with NATO forces. Astana has expressed interest in deploying the unit in support of a United Nations (but not NATO) peacekeeping mission. The 37th SAAB has been designated a “peacekeeping support” unit in the framework of Kazakhstan’s Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) obligations. **End FMSO Commentary.***